

Time and time, our leaders have acted with punctual programmes to deal with larger issues of information poverty. They have been poorly prepared to venture into new information opportunities. Instead of *pro-acting*, they've *reacted* in the narrow confines of governments and business interests.

There are many examples of that kind. Like most information-based initiatives in poor nations, specially in Africa, the Smart News Network International was shabbily marketed. It is almost nowhere to be access on the Internet.

I have yet to find its true value to the information society debate. Worse, the face off with Western media is a ridiculous confrontation and a waste of resources for poor nation economies.

Even if the fight against image biases were a credible cause, the approach to dealing with information confrontation is a loosing battle against a dominant enemy who is almost unassailable. So much for such uncoordinated and unresolved initiatives that add to the balance sheet of information deficit and do damage to our ability to be relevant and meaningful players in the generation of wealth in the economy of ideas.

Poor nations are competing in political and economic blind alleys. Worse, they are diverting needful resources to symbolic initiatives and neglecting to determine internal deployment mechanisms for critical success.

These uncoordinated initiatives are the drivers of the so-called digital divide. Indeed, there is wary evidence that digital poverty is a concern for the economic and political future of Africa and needs to be address

If we consider that information generally flows where it is most needed, we notice quickly that Africa doesn't fit this truism, as the information doesn't flow toward the continent. Africa is in the margin of major economic and political information flows. Thus, the continent and its citizens suffer from critical information deficit. They struggle with access to basic government information and business intelligence.

The views expressed here are not that of the IUCN, but the opinion of the author(s)

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**POLICY THINK TANK SERIES
NO. 15**

Digital Poverty

Could Africa overcome its net information deficit?

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January 2002

Despite efforts made by governments, business and non-governmental institutions, the African net information deficit keeps growing at an alarming rate. African nations are struggling to meet the basic requirements of information technology readiness and digital opportunities for a sound economic development. Consequently, a disconcerting information divide has become apparent as the gap between information rich and poor widens.

Is the so-called digital divide – or what I'd call *digital poverty* - relevant to Africa today? Is Africa suffering from a critical information growth and management deficit? Will Africa ever overcome its net information deficit? What can African leaders do to best address the issue? Should we care at all?

Last August in Uganda at the Global 2001 Smart Partnership Dialogue meeting of presidents, seven African nations and Malaysia launched the Smart News Network International, a web-based news service, to help counter biased coverage of Africa and developing nations.

The service is to give "accurate, fair and balanced news to counter inaccurate and biased news disseminated by other news providers" toward poor nations.

While such action by the presidents of South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Sudan, Malawi and Mozambique and Malaysia's prime minister seem well-intentioned, it is a symptomatic action that hides a deficit in information readiness.

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For that matter, I would consider African citizens the most information disempowered on the planet. They lack almost anything that requires critical information readiness.

In many African countries and particularly in South Africa, while the legal framework is commendable and favourable, the majority of citizens hardly have access to basic government and business information.

Indeed, we should care and do something about it if we consider digital poverty a great threat to our economic development. But the implications for action are daunting. Government and business leaderships in information opportunity management have been appalling and deserve rethinking.

So far, the focus has been directed mainly toward information poverty issues. Information opportunities should be the new priority.

The opportunities range from the understanding of e-government readiness access or 24-hour government; the teaching and practices of e-commerce for all citizens; and the consistent education of our leaders about critical information management for economic success.

If our leaders genuinely understand the meaning of digital poverty, the economics of information and their combined logic, they will also value its usage and meritorious applications in all spheres of wealth creation for Africa – economic, social, political, and cultural.

So far, it seems few do. Even so, they badly translate these understandings into practical policies. They poorly communicate them to their constituencies. Hence, the staggering political and economic leadership handicaps for Africa's sustained economic development and growth.

When our leaders venture to grasp the meaning of such complexity, they will be truly informed about their role as agents of development in the coming genuine African information society. Then, African citizenry will be liberated and be freed from dictatorships and the tyranny of poverty. But most important, sustained wealth creation will be a reality.